Guanajuato, Mexico, has been on the UNESCO World Heritage list since 1988, thanks to its colonial Spanish architecture, silver-mining history, and sites related to the Mexican Revolution. Its baroque churches, narrow cobblestone streets, and candy-colored houses are postcard-pretty, but the biggest tourist attraction in the central Mexican city is darker and more gruesome than all that: an underground museum of one hundred mummies.

Word got out about these miraculous mummies, which gravediggers propped along the walls in an underground ossuary. Some still wore their burial clothes, high-button shoes, or tags indicating their names and death dates. They quickly became a curiosity and a moneymaker for cemetery workers.

### Robbery of the Mummies of Guanajuato

I am a lover of history and museums, but this one I just really don't understand. It's one thing if someone agreed to be mummified and put on display before they died (this is the case with some mummies in the Vatican). But if some Egyptian king thought he was being laid to rest forever in his tomb, we ought to have left him there. We're not better than grave robbers to put his body on display now.

Once word of the Guanajuato mummies spread around town, curious townsfolk began paying workers at the cemetery a few pesos to catch a peek. And as the workers pulled more and more bodies out of the crypt, they found even an even greater amount of gruesome mummies.

Those who excavated the mummies could not identify every corpse, and tourists made things worse by stealing their name tags once the mummies were put on display, robbing the mummies of their identities.

"To make people interested in seeing the mummies, cemetery workers started telling stories about hangings, desperados, and witches," Gerald Conlogue, a diagnostic imaging professor at Quinnipiac University who studied the mummies, told National Geographic.

When the museum opened its doors, it continued to play on the drama of the mummies' unknown identities. Tour guides and visitors alike nicknamed one female mummy with severe scoliosis La Bruja, or The Witch. Another corpse earned the name El Ahogado, or The Drowned Man.

Even today, despite plaques in the museum which offer some background information on the mummies, visitors continue to make up stories about who these individuals once were and what kind of lives they led.

However, the museum isn't without controversy. For one, a 2023 study found that the mummies may be contaminating the living with dangerous fungal spores. Though the mummies are held in glass cases, the cases themselves may not be airtight, which could allow the spores to escape.

The mummies have toured across Mexico, eliciting critiques about the careless handling of some of the corpses. National Geographic reports that they have been displayed at conventions and, to the anger of many, even in Guanajuato's underground tunnels during a car rally.
In an attempt to provide the mummies with greater dignity, the National Institute of Anthropology and History in Mexico created teams to research 19th and 20th-century death certificates, church documents, and newspapers to identify more of the mummies.

"They should be treated like human bodies," Mexican anthropologist Juan Manuel Argüelles San Millán said to National Geographic. This means that if a descendant of the mummies wishes to have his or her relative buried, it should be done "immediately and without any problem."

After learning the true story behind the infamous Guanajuato mummies, learn about the fiendish plot behind the burial of Egypt’s "screaming mummy". Then, check out the Paris catacombs, the world's largest crypt.

As one of the historical cities of Mexico, there are many interesting Guanajuato museums to visit. The most popular is the Mummy Museum which has a rather peculiar history as it is not like the Egyptian-style mummies.